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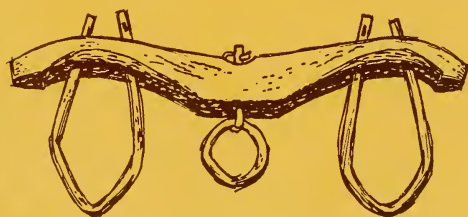
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The Galesburg Lincoln-
Debater for God

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The Galesburg Lincoln—
Debater For God



“HE HATH SHOWED THEE, O MAN, WHAT IS GOOD;
AND WHAT DOTTH THE LORD REQUIRE OF THEE,
BUT TO DO JUSTLY, AND TO LOVE MERCY,
AND TO WALK HUMBLY WITH THY GOD?”

—Micah 6:8.

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The Galesburg Lincoln — Debater For God

Thursday, October 7, 1858, was the most historic day in local history. On that day, as all of us know, Abraham Lincoln spoke here. The occasion was his fifth debate with Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln was the Republican candidate for United States senator; Douglas, the Democratic incumbent. They had debated in Ottawa, Clinton, Freeport, Charleston. Now they were in Galesburg. The debate took place, all of us will again recall, on the east side of "Old Main." Doubtless we have all seen the bronze plaques on that college building commemorating the event.

What can we say about the Galesburg Lincoln? What point had he reached in his career? What were his convictions, his bewilderments? Where was he in his grasp of political and moral issues? What was his spiritual stature? Let me suggest some answers. Let me sketch some phases of the living Lincoln as he was driven in a carriage down the mud of Main Street in the Galesburg of 87 years ago, as he came down Broad Street past the Old First Church, as he stood on a platform on that October Thursday ostensibly answering Douglas but really speaking to the minds and hearts of many thousands of farmer folk, townsfolk and students—speaking, indeed, to the mind and heart of a nation.

But first—for the sake of setting—a word about the Galesburg of that time. With the help of Carl Sandburg ("The Prairie Years") and Earnest Elmo Calkins ("They Broke the Prairie") let's recall a few facts. Founded in 1837, Galesburg was just 21 years old when it welcomed Lincoln. It had five thousand people (with four times that many on the day of the debate!). We had a variety of stores here; we had factories turning out plows, wagons, shoes and dozens of other items; we had our rail connection with Chicago; we of course had our college; we were a trade and social center for farmers raising fine corn and hogs. Dr. Edward Beecher had just come to be pastor of our First Congregational Church. Reverend Harvey Curtis was now the third president of our college (the colorful Blanchard having resigned that June). Both college and town were still badly split into Blanchard and

Gale factions. Various citizens were active in making Galesburg a leading station on the "Underground Railroad." Carl Sandburg's birth was still twenty years away. Such were some of the phases of the Galesburg of 1858.

The great debate, we have reminded ourselves, was held on the east side of "Old Main". Originally planned for south of the building, the shift was made to take the speakers out of a raw wind. It had rained the day before; the air was damp. Perhaps this was the reason why, instead of his usual shawl, Lincoln that day wore a long cloak. (Some say that when he rose to speak he handed this cloak to someone on the platform, saying, "Hold this while I stone Stephen"—evidence, if true, of both Lincoln's humor under stress and his familiarity with the Bible).

So much for our town and college setting. What now of our man?

First of all, we may say this: *The Galesburg Lincoln was a man rapidly emerging as a national leader.* He was still the prairie lawyer (now 49 years old), but a lawyer arguing his Number One case before the nation. Four months before, in the State Republican convention, he had made his "House Divided" speech.

"In my opinion it (agitation) will not cease until a crisis will have been reached and passed. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or the other."

That speech was sticking in the national mind. And now, with each added debate with the nationally famous Douglas, Lincoln was gaining more and more of a national reputation himself. Folks were beginning to say that here was a man who could argue on equal terms with the doughty Douglas. The campaign of 1860, when Lincoln was to run as a dark horse for the presidency, was still two years away, but some people were already suggesting him for that office. Hints of campaign slogans—"Free Soil, Free Homesteads, Free Territories"—and the campaign song:

"Old Abe Lincoln came out of the wilderness,
Out of the wilderness, out of the wilderness,
Old Abe Lincoln came out of the wilderness,
Down in Illinois"

—these hints and turns of political thought were drifting through some minds as people watched and listened to the angular, still smooth-faced lawyer from Springfield, Illinois.

Now a second observation about our Galesburg Lincoln. *He was a man possessed by a dream—the American Dream—that of a free democratic society.* I say that he was possessed by this dream. He did not have it so much as *it had him.*

Lincoln found this dream outlined in the Declaration of Independence—particularly in the words “all men are created equal.” Not equal in all respects—obviously not, but “equal with ‘certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’”. Lincoln saw clearly that what the signers of the Declaration were aiming at was equality not of capacity (a goal beyond mortal powers) but equality of opportunity. As Carl Sandburg comments “the accent and stress was to be on opportunity, on equal chance, equal access to the resources of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Every man was to have, insofar as possible, an equal chance. That was the gist of our Founding Fathers’ dream. The Mayflower descendant and the recent immigrant, the white man and the black man—all were to have an equal opportunity to draw upon the common resources and to make their contributions. Again and again Lincoln sounded this note. He does so in the Galesburg debate.

Lincoln held some corollary convictions about this American Dream of ours. In the first place, he knew this: *The dream is indivisible.* He took with utter seriousness the “all” of “all men.” He knew that when we start qualifying, when we start saying “Well, *almost* all men,” we are destroying our basic dream. Said Lincoln in Chicago, three months before the debate here, “I should like to know if, taking this old Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men are equal upon principle, and making exceptions to it, where will it stop? If one man says it does not mean a Negro, why may not another man say it does not mean another man?” The “Know-Nothings” of that day, forerunners of the hate groups of today, were actually taking this democracy-destroying line. As Lincoln once wrote, their reading of the famous Declaration was “all men are created equal—except Negroes, foreigners, and Catholics.” That kind of thinking dynamites our American Dream. Either we really mean “all” by “all men” or we don’t. For Stephen A. Douglas it was the latter. For him the Declaration meant “all white men.” He is very plain about this in the Galesburg debate. He refers to Lincoln’s equality doctrine as “a monstrous

heresy". Well, so it is—for those who believe in a class society, for the racists and the facists.

Abraham Lincoln realized that our American Dream is indivisible. He also realized that it is *our defense against dictators*. With regard again to the statement on human equality in the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln said "Its authors meant it to be—as, thank God, it is now proving itself—a stumbling-block to those who in after times might seek to turn a free people back into the hateful paths of despotism." The equality maxim is a "stumbling-block" to anti-democratic forces. Conversely, it is a stepping-stone for all who would practice and perfect democracy.

But let us come closer now to the Lincoln of our "Old Main" debate. Our Democratic Dream runs through that debate—at least through Lincoln's remarks. For example, he makes the point that the principle of equal opportunity must apply in all new territories. Where slavery already exists, he says—well, it exists and the nation must somehow get along in spite of that fact. But, says Lincoln, "in legislating for new countries where it (slavery) does not exist, there is no just rule other than that of moral and abstract right." Lincoln is for the extension of our Democratic Dream. Douglas, on the other hand, argues that each state and each Territory should decide for itself whether to be slave-holding or not. Lincoln regards this as a crass denial of the Republic—the ideal phrased by Jefferson in his timeless document.

But now let us not make the mistake of thinking that the Galesburg Lincoln was completely the prophet of democracy. He tended later to become that. But he was not that in October, 1858. I say this not for the sake of "debunking" (a cheap unprofitable business), but for the sake of accuracy. The truth is that the Galesburg Lincoln was a man in some mental confusion (over the black race) but a man who had arrived at a moral certainty ("Slavery is a moral, social, and political evil"). In contrast, I believe that Douglas was a man of mental certainties but of *moral* confusion. Of the two plights, Lincoln's was the better because his moral certainty put him finally in line with God. Douglas, as I see it, was like a man who reads all the signs right but is on the wrong road from the start. Lincoln was like a man getting some of the signs wrong but sticking through an unfailing sense of direction to the right road.

What was Lincoln's mental confusion over the black race? Well, it was a natural one, rooted in the times. Lincoln wanted to fit the black man into our Declaration of Independence, but, after all, Lincoln

was living in the mid-nineteenth century. He was living in an age for which Negro chiefly meant *slave*—in an age when popular sentiment, science, and the pulpit generally united in the belief that the Negro was an inferior being. Lincoln was living some decades before the Dr. Carvers, the Paul Robesons, the Marion Andersons came along to demonstrate how creative, given a chance, the Negro people can be—as creative as any people under the sun. He was living some time before leading scientists were to declare that there is no reason to believe in any innate differences of capacity among the races. Lincoln was living two generations ahead of the day when fair-minded people everywhere would join in saying, “There are no inferior races; only inferior opportunities.”

Hence we find Abraham Lincoln, reflecting the limited horizon of his time, speaking here in Galesburg of “inferior races.” But we also find him, three months earlier, saying this: “Let us discard all this quibbling about . . . this race and that race and the other race being inferior”. Similarly, in our Galesburg debate, Lincoln reaffirms his conviction that equality between the white and black races does not mean “a perfect social and political equality”. That, he says, is “an impossibility”. But, on the other hand, he keeps coming back to that banner-phrase “All men are created equal”. Well, if we believe in equality of opportunity but withhold, for example, the right to vote (political equality) from a minority group—do we really believe (as Wendell Phillips was asking in Lincoln’s day—and indeed about Lincoln himself) in equality of opportunity?

Yes, Lincoln had his inconsistencies. But note this well—his inconsistencies at this point were part of his glory! He was inconsistent because his vision of a free society was in basic conflict with certain feudal assumptions of his age. He shared some of those assumptions—but never with his whole being. His moral certainty that slavery was evil and his intuitive realization of our fundamental human equality kept lifting him above his age—and in a sense above himself.

What can we say about our Galesburg Lincoln? He was a man, we have seen, rapidly developing as a national leader. He was a man possessed by a dream—the American Dream—that of a free democratic society. He saw that this dream is indivisible and that it is our defense against tyranny. He passionately wanted the new territories made safe for this dream. Finally, our Galesburg Lincoln was a man whose moral insight and moral passion transcended the racial assumptions—and prejudices—of his time. Because of these twin facts—the dream fact

and the moral fact—our Galesburg Lincoln was a debater for God. He was a debater for the God who must love the common people “because he made so many of them”; he was a debater for the God of mercy and social justice; he was a debater for the God of brotherhood. We see all this clearly now—87 years after. And we know that this Lincoln, this prairie-prophet of God, is still years ahead of many of us. He beckons to us not so much from the past as from the future, saying “Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and under a just God cannot long retain it.” He beckons to us from the future, saying that anyone who (as Douglas did) denies a fellow-American his share in the Declaration of Independence “is blowing out the moral lights around us.” Yes, Abraham Lincoln beckons to us from the fairer years ahead, urging us that, in remembering those who have died for freedom, we so conduct ourselves “that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

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Mr. Jenkins acknowledges his great indebtedness to the above works by Mr. Sandburg and Mr. Calkins.

For a skillful recreating of the October 7, 1858, scene the reading of “Lincoln Goes to College”, a radio drama by Wade Arnold (included in “Record of the Centenary of Knox College and Galesburg”, Wagoner Printing Company, Galesburg, Ill.) is also recommended.

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